


1996

Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia: Reviving the Kustar Art Industries

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Recommended Citation

Salmond, Wendy R. *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia: Reviving the Kustar Art Industries, 1870-1917*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

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The Abramtsevo Workshops

In the academic debate over who will emerge the victor in the battle between factory and kустar industry, artistic kустar production occupies one of the strongest positions, for the simple fact that artistic activity doesn't need heavy machinery, large engines, and the extensive appliances of the factory.

N. Elfimov



IN THE COMPLEX STRUCTURE of Russian peasant society at the close of the nineteenth century, the kустar, or peasant handicraftsman, occupied an uncertain and ambivalent position. Public opinion swung between two extremes. Was he the heir to centuries of folk culture or simply a primitive form of proto-industrialization? Was he Russia's only hope for the future or a source of national shame? Was he a precious symbol of country life or a symptom of agriculture's decline?¹ The officially sanctioned definition of kустar industry as "the small-scale family organization of production of goods for sale, common among the peasant population of Russia as a supplement to agriculture" did little to answer these questions.²

To the extent that the educated urban public thought about the kустar at all in the postemancipation period, it was with indifference or distaste:

In the mind of our public a kустar item will be one that can satisfy only the modest tastes of the rural consumer. According to the city dweller, the kустar makes gigantic boots for the Ukraine that would make any Frenchman or even a German shudder. He models pottery, simple milk pitchers, and earthenware dishes for rural use. He knocks together benches and tables with rickety legs for peasant huts. He weaves rough canvas and homespun skirts for fashion-conscious country belles. He

makes felt boots, sledge runners, and carts for his peasant brother. He forges countless oven forks, nails, and horseshoes, and carves fairground wooden toys for five kopeks a pair.³

This had not always been the case, however. The word *kustar* had first come into use in the early eighteenth century and was thought to be a corruption of the German word *Künstler*, thus originally implying a skilled craftsman.⁴ Many kustar crafts had their origins in the natural economy of Muscovite Russia, when households produced only what they needed for their own use. Others emerged in the wake of Peter the Great's attempts to foster factory-type manufacturing, as peasants took the expertise they had learned in the factory back to their villages where they set up their own cottage industries.⁵ Under serfdom many kustar crafts were turned into high-quality commercial manufactories through a system of private estate workshops. According to one observer, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, "There was scarcely a landowning family or farm that didn't make use of peasant labor in the form of kustar production. Making the peasants spin, weave, embroider, knit, and so on during the long winters, serf landowners in part met their own everyday needs, in part sold goods to the towns, thereby increasing the income from their holdings."⁶ Women's crafts in particular were cultivated as a way of satisfying the landowners' preference for foreign-style goods, and serf women learned to produce skillful imitations of cashmere shawls and French laces that were sold in St. Petersburg and Moscow as the genuine article, packaged in London and Paris boxes.⁷ Serf lacemakers and spinners were a favorite subject for early-nineteenth-century Romantic painters, and despite the brutal conditions under which they worked, the models for Vasilii Tropinin's *The Lacemaker* (1823) and Aleksei Venetsianov's *Girl Carding Flax* (1822), *Morning of a Lady Landowner* (1823), and *Woman Spinning* (1839) were nevertheless viewed as integral parts of a stable social and economic organism.

The kustar's difficulties began with the Emancipation Act of February 1861, which was as catastrophic in its consequences for kustar production as it was for agriculture, with which it was symbiotically linked. Russia's huge peasant population emerged from the Great Reforms with their freedom, but also with smaller and less fertile land allotments that made it harder to produce raw materials for home consumption, with crushing dues to pay their former owners, and with a disproportionate percentage of the nation's tax burden. In a growing consumer economy where money was a necessity, the production of goods for sale to an outside market became essential, while paradoxically it became cheaper to buy factory-made goods for per-

sonal use than to make them at home. For more and more peasants, especially those in the northern and central provinces where the land yielded a poor or unreliable living and the winters were long, kustar industry became an essential form of crisis management. But as crop failures and droughts became more commonplace throughout the second half of the century, the axiom that "The lower the income from farming, the stronger the tendency for the broad range of rural supplementary crafts and trades"⁸ came to apply increasingly to the black soil regions of central Russia.

The kustar's greatest natural enemies in postreform Russia were the factory and a governmental policy for promoting rapid industrial growth that was to be funded primarily by the taxes and agricultural production of the peasantry. By the 1870s those kustar crafts where manual labor could be easily replaced by machines (nail making, hand weaving, textile printing, and dyeing) were already on the verge of extinction. Others managed to survive, either because of their extreme labor cheapness, because modern technology had yet to devise a way to replace human beings, or because the notion of hand production was an important part of the craft's luxury value. But even in industries like woodworking, icon painting, and lacemaking that could expect to withstand mechanization for some time to come, an exploitative middleman system kept entire villages trapped in a state of debt and dependency from which they could not escape unaided. Because they produced for an unspecified, often distant market and not just their immediate community, most of Russia's kustar population depended on middlemen (*skupshchiki*) to mediate between them and the customer, to tell them what would sell in far-off cities, and to provide patterns and raw materials. Kustar labor had almost no monetary value, since any work was better than none in the long winter months of enforced idleness; and with no labor laws to protect the kustar, an average work day of fourteen to eighteen hours was the norm, with children working alongside their parents (Fig. 5). Under these conditions the kustar's only advantage over the machine was the extraordinary cheapness of his labor.

All of these factors help to explain why, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, "kustarnichestvo" had entered the language as a common derogatory term for anything country-bumpkinish, primitive, or ill made. But in academic and economic circles there was a second, ideological level of meaning implicit in the word that began to emerge in the 1870s along with the spread of populism. The very backwardness and technological primitiveness of kustar industry came to acquire an absolute symbolic value in a nation undergoing the

Figure 5. Family of kustari
weaving rush baskets, ca.
1913. (Reprinted from
*Kustarnoe delo moskovskogo
zemstva* [Moscow, 1913].
Courtesy of Institute of
Modern Russian Culture)



pangs of rapid industrialization, and it became a commonplace that "inasmuch as the factory worker is a progressive in everything, just so is the kustar a staunch conservative, especially if he maintains a close link to the land."⁹ Framed as a heroic protagonist in Russia's struggle between tradition and progress, Western and native culture, country and town, the kustar unwittingly became a key player in the late-nineteenth-century debates between populists and Marxists on the nation's economic future.

For economists like Petr Struve and Mikhail Tugan-Baranovskii, the decline and ultimate disappearance of kustar industry in Russia was a simple fact of economic history. Comparing Russia with more advanced European nations, they saw the kustar's losing battle for survival as an inevitable symptom of Russia's belated modernization and the working of inexorable economic laws. It was only a matter of time, they argued, before kustar industry merged with large-scale industry as it had already done in England and Western Europe. "Kustarnichestvo" was just another word for *Hausindustrie*, *buissonnière*, or *industrie domestique*, and like these European forms of domestic production was nothing more than a form of proto-industrialization, the "threshold to capitalism."¹⁰

Violently opposed to this universalistic approach were the populists, with V. P. Vorontsov and N. Danielson at their head, who insisted that "kustar industry exists only in Russia. It should be seen as an expression of character and acknowledged as an entirely national form of industry."¹¹ Like the *obshchina* or peasant commune on which the populists' vision of a socialist world order was based, the kustar industries symbolized Russia's separate path, and their continued survival was Russia's security against the ills of capitalism and the proletarianization of the peasant. As one apologist wrote, "Having observed the more advanced European nations as they advanced toward capitalism and industrialization," and having seen "the struggle between the poor worker and the employer, a bitter struggle where people regard each other as enemies, . . . we are afraid that our domestic life will become a photographic copy of the life of Western society, and we want to fight against those factors that promote the development of class struggle."¹² Even liberal economists who accepted the inevitability of Russia's road to capitalism considered that most kustar industries would be around for at least as long as Russia remained economically and technologically backward, and that they would serve as an essential economic and social buffer in the painful transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy. Although the intrinsic nature of kustar industry (its cheapness, primitive technology, etc.) meant that it would never be a major force in the national economy, there were far more important arguments to be made for its protection and development, arguments that involved the very structure of family and social life in Russia:

We reconcile ourselves to the economic shortcomings of kustar industry and want to hold on to it because of its benefits in many aspects of daily life, and to preserve the health of the family. In kustar industry we see a form of production that serves as a good supplement for the peasant in areas with poor soil, that doesn't take the producer from his family, and that doesn't prematurely undermine the worker's health, thanks to intervals of summer field work. For all these reasons we value kustar industry.¹³

The first stirrings of public interest in the future of the distressed kustar population surfaced in 1870, when delegates at both the Congress of Agronomists in Moscow and the Congress of Manufacturers, Factory Owners, and Individuals Interested in National Industry in St. Petersburg proclaimed the importance of kustar labor and urged the government to investigate the circumstances of its rapid decline.¹⁴ The following year the Imperial Russian Geographical Society formed a special commission to gather statistical data on the state and distribu-

tion of kустar industries throughout the empire. The resulting sixteen-volume report, published in 1874, estimated that 7.5 million peasants depended on kустar production for survival and warned that many of these industries were in immediate need of assistance.¹⁵ Under pressure from the minister of state domains, who brought the matter to the attention of Alexander III, the Ministry of Finance's Council on Trade and Industry appointed its own commission in 1872 to organize more fact-finding expeditions, and between 1874 and 1886 a second vast body of statistical information on the kустar industries was published, confirming both the importance of kустarnichestvo and the extent of its decline.¹⁶

To those who argued that events be allowed to run their course, or that the kустar could take care of himself, proponents of a government-sponsored revival retorted that

leaving the kустar to his own devices will inevitably lead to the decline of our agricultural economy. The kустar is well aware of all the shortcomings of his trade. He knows that city goods of the same kind are more sophisticated and better suited to the customer's taste. He knows that he is dependent on the middleman . . . and he has a general idea of the changes in the conditions of production that would be beneficial to him. But by himself he can do nothing to bring those changes about.¹⁷

Despite the official signs of concern noted above, however, the Russian government was extraordinarily slow to embark on practical measures that would rescue the kустar from his predicament. Physically isolated in St. Petersburg from the problems of peasant life, the government agencies that might have come to the kустar's aid (the Ministries of Finance, State Domains, and Agriculture) spent almost twenty years bickering over whether the government should intervene in kустar affairs, which agency should take responsibility for them, and who should fund their revival, before finally embarking on a practical course of action in 1888.¹⁸ Local government bodies in the provinces, the so-called zemstva, undertook their own fact-finding missions at the local level but were just as slow to invest in practical solutions. Consequently, for nearly a decade it was almost exclusively a handful of determined private landowners who, motivated by populist and philanthropic ideals, plunged into the problem of practical kустar reform with their own kind of very concrete localized aid. Although easily dismissed as mere Band-Aid solutions to an incurable disease, such instances of private estate reform actually created an important prototype for subsequent government measures, and in one notable case, the Abramtsevo kустar carpentry workshop, established a prece-

dent for the intervention of professional artists in kустar production that was to dominate the future course of all successful efforts to save the kустar from extinction.

In many ways the kустar carpentry workshop established in 1876 at Abramtsevo, the estate of the Mamontov family in Moscow province, was conceived as a kind of hands-on populism very much in tune with the times. Situated some seventy kilometers northeast of Moscow, not far from the Troitse-Sergieva Lavra and the Khotkovo convent, Abramtsevo already had a rich history before it was purchased in 1870 by railway magnate Savva Mamontov and his wife, Elizaveta.¹⁹ In the 1830s and 1840s it had been the home of the Slavophile writer Sergei Aksakov and the center of a literary circle that included Gogol and Turgenev.²⁰ These cultural and nationalist associations were not lost on the new owners, both of them typical representatives of the Moscow merchant class, with its strong tradition of social service and good works.²¹ Both were scions of families that had made their considerable fortunes through industry – in his case through the construction of the Moscow-Troitse Railway and other ventures, in hers through the Sapozhnikov textile mills – and both belonged to a generation that considered that wealth and privilege entailed certain moral responsibilities toward the masses. Yet despite their similar backgrounds, the young couple's aspirations to good works were manifested in very different ways. Savva Mamontov's commitment to the masses, such as it was, was to enlighten them through art. His patronage of the major Russian painters of the 1880s and 1890s, his Private Opera Company (f. 1885), and his interest in art ceramics all partook vaguely of Dostoevskii's maxim "Beauty will save the world." His wife's philanthropy was of a more pragmatic kind and was inspired by her awareness of the local rural population's lack of health care, elementary education, and economic stability. It was thanks to Elizaveta Mamontova that in the early 1870s a hospital and an elementary school were opened on the estate to serve the peasant families of the area and that in 1876 a joinery workshop was added where pupils who had graduated from the school might learn a useful trade. The following passage, written by the first biographer of the Abramtsevo kустar workshop, outlines the ethical and philanthropic considerations underlying the workshop's initial foundation; it could, however, as easily describe any of a dozen similar efforts undertaken at this period, and its arguments and rationale reflect the populist sentiments of the 1870s and 1880s in favor of "peaceful cultural work among the peasantry, strengthening

communal land tenure in the countryside and developing *kustar* industry and *artels* (workers' cooperatives).²²

Elizaveta Grigorievna wanted not only to bring enlightenment to the new generation but to improve its material well-being, and thus its moral standards as well. She felt that seasonal work was demoralizing for the young and especially that the atmosphere of "apprenticeship" which pervaded workshops in the urban centers corrupted them. In the countryside, however, deprived of its workforce, agriculture was declining and poverty increasing. By establishing a joinery workshop Elizaveta Grigorievna hoped to give peasants the chance not to send their children to the city for training, not to separate them from their families, but instead to train them as local *kustar* joiners.²³

Abramtsevo was located in a province long famous for its wood-working, and the statistical researches of the 1870s had singled out the Moscow furniture region as "one of the few oases that stands out in the boundless sea of declining *kustar* production."²⁴ Of the five basic groups into which *kustar* crafts were traditionally divided – wood, metal, clay, fibers, skins and furs – woodworking was the most widespread and employed the most hands. Not only was wood one of the cheapest and most easily available materials, it was also exempt from the crippling import duties that metalworkers faced. *Kustar* woodworkers were considered more likely to retain traditional forms of family production and rarely used hired labor, and their primitive tools and techniques gave them far greater protection from being made redundant by machines, as was already happening to the Iaroslavl weavers, the Tver nail makers, and the Pavlovo cutlers. On a more symbolic level, wood was considered the Russian material par excellence, and the Mamontovs themselves, enthusiastic followers of the current fashion for vernacular wooden architecture and intricate drill carving, commissioned the architects Viktor Gartman and Ivan Ropot to design several outbuildings at Abramtsevo, lavishly decorated with wooden lace based on peasant prototypes (Fig. 6).²⁵

Mamontova was no doubt conscious of at least some of these considerations when she opened her carpentry workshop for local peasant boys, but by the early 1880s she had made little progress in attaining her initial philanthropic goals. Technically and aesthetically the simple furniture that the pupils learned to make held no attraction for any but the humblest rural clientele, and there was little financial incentive to prevent them from going to Moscow in search of bright lights and higher wages once they had finished their training. Located some distance from the main house on the estate, the workshop was ignored by most of the artists who came there to sketch, produce amateur



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Figure 6. Studio at
Abramtsevo, by Viktor
Gartman, 1873. (Courtesy of
William Craft Brumfield)

theatricals, hunt, and fish,²⁶ and it was symptomatic of the pupils' lowly status outside the artistic mainstream of Abramtsevo life that no one thought to use their services for the construction and decoration of the small church that was built on the estate in 1881–2 (Fig. 7). The elaborate carving on the royal doors that Vasilii Polenov designed for the sanctuary, for instance, was carried out in a professional workshop in Moscow.²⁷

The gulf that separated the peasant boys in the workshop from a rapidly disappearing tradition of folk art was underscored by the enthusiasm with which the Mamontovs and their friends Vasilii Polenov, Il'ia Repin, and Viktor Vasnetsov began to collect examples of wood carving in the villages around Abramtsevo (Fig. 8). Elizaveta Mamontova could not but compare the rough and utilitarian furniture produced in her *kustar* training workshop with the carved and painted

artifacts that could still be found in everyday use throughout the countryside. Increasingly dissatisfied with the patent failure of her workshop to serve her original philanthropic intentions, Mamontova decided to reorganize it along more artistic lines. To do so, she enlisted the help of a recent addition to the Mamontov circle, the artist Elena Dmitrievna Polenova.²⁸

Born in Petrozavodsk in 1850, Elena Dmitrievna was the youngest in a family steeped in Russian history and culture. Her father, D. M. Polenov, was a respected archaeologist and secretary of the Imperial Archaeological Society, her mother, Maria Alekseevna, wrote and illustrated books for children, and her elder brother, Vasili, had already embarked on a successful painting career. Polenova's childhood and adolescence were not especially happy, according to her brother-in-law, who remembered her as a shy, silent, and apathetic teenager.²⁹ Summers were spent at Imochentsy, her family's estate in the remote northern province of Olonets, or in Tambov province with her grandmother, from whom she learned a good deal about Russian history and folklore. But during the long winter months she led a solitary and rather joyless life with her family in St. Petersburg, enlivened however by lessons in drawing and watercolor from the academician Pavel

Figure 7. Church at Abramtsevo, by Viktor Vasnetsov, 1881-2. (Courtesy of William Craft Brumfield)

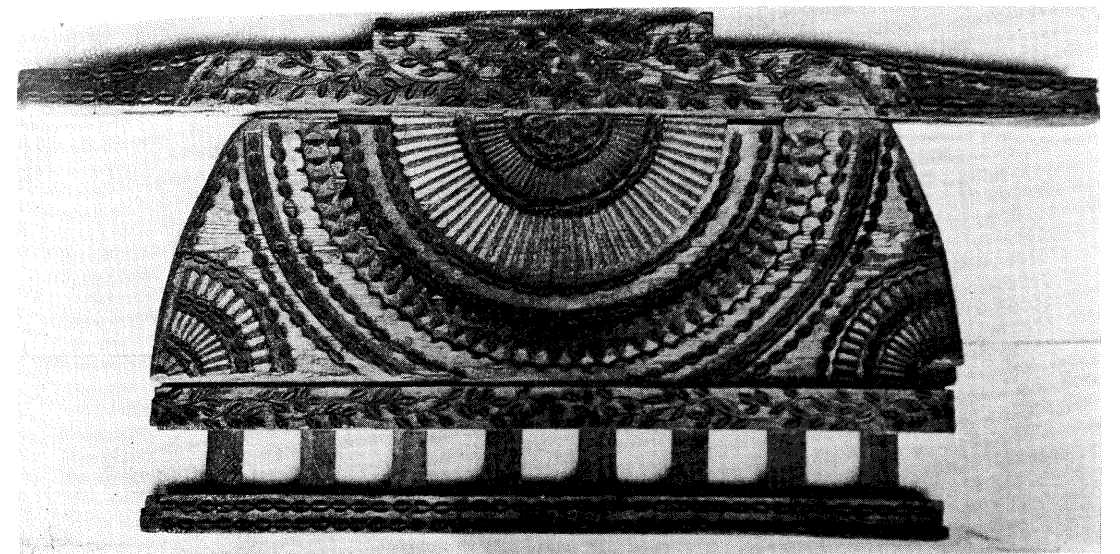


Chistiakov, as well as from Ivan Kramskoi, a leading member of the Association of Traveling Exhibitions, or Wanderers.

The single most important influence on Polenova in these formative years was her elder sister, Vera, a typical "woman of the sixties" consumed with her generation's passion for social service and self-sacrifice. During the Turko-Bulgarian war (1877-8) the two sisters served as volunteer nurses in Kiev,³⁰ and when they returned to St. Petersburg they attended medical courses for women with the intention of opening a clinic for local peasants at Imochentsy. By the age of twenty-eight, then, Polenova had tasted "the enormous pleasure a person receives from the realization that she has rendered direct aid to another in trouble" and realized that "to return to my former life, that is, to deprive myself of working for society in some form or another would be like depriving myself of healthy and nourishing food."³¹ In St. Petersburg she immediately volunteered her services as a drawing teacher in a charity school for girls, where she introduced classes in sewing, tailoring, and drawing that transformed an elementary school into "a big professional school for women, with well-equipped workshops."³²

The passion for social service did not rule out art, however, and in the winter of 1879 Polenova enrolled at the School of the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts in St. Petersburg, where she took classes in watercolor and ceramics, both considered eminently suitable media for a woman artist.³³ As the society's first pensioner to be sent abroad, she studied ceramic techniques in the Paris studio of the Rus-

Figure 8. Carved backboard from a peasant cart, late nineteenth century, Abramtsevo Museum. (Reprinted from N. V. Polenova, *Abramtsevo* [Moscow, 1922])



sian ceramist Evdokim Egorov and at the Deck factories,³⁴ and on her return to Russia opened classes in faience painting as well as continuing to study watercolor at the society's school. But the death of her sister, Vera, in 1881 proved so devastating that in October of the following year she left St. Petersburg and moved to Moscow, where her brother, Vasilii, now lived.

It was through Vasilii that Polenova met the Mamontovs, and she was immediately accepted into their circle as a talented and serious painter.³⁵ Lacking a formal education in oil painting and life drawing, Polenova worked primarily in watercolor, and her first exhibited works – flower studies and landscapes – were bought by Savva Mamontov and the collector Pavel Tret'iakov. Through the open houses that Vasilii held each Thursday for his friends and pupils (he was on the faculty of the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture), she met many of the young artists who would become her colleagues in the Moscow Association of Artists a decade later, and she quickly became a participant in the amateur theatricals for which the Mamontovs were renowned, helping to design and make costumes.

But despite the active tenor of her new Moscow life, Polenova's rather uncompromising personality and lack of social graces, as well as her marked desire for some form of social service, made the company and interests of the devout and gentle Elizaveta Mamontova more congenial to her. Whereas Savva Ivanovich, "with his enterprises, his extravagance, his picnics, cavalcades and idleness, his entourage of artists and actors,"³⁶ revealed to Polenova a world of high art, idealism, and personal laurels that she timidly aspired to enter, his wife, Elizaveta, drew her into a more familiar and morally sustaining sphere of social responsibility and self-abnegation. Trained in the modest and womanly decorative arts, and yearning for a life spent in service to others, Polenova was the perfect solution to Mamontova's dilemma regarding her carpentry workshop. When Mamontova organized expeditions with her children into the surrounding countryside to collect examples of peasant carving and textiles, Polenova went along armed with a sketchbook in which she noted down ornamental motifs and fragmentary views of peasant life. It was probably Viktor Vasnetsov, a longtime member of the Mamontov circle, who first suggested to Polenova that she use her sketchbook and the growing Abramtsevo collection of peasant artifacts as raw material from which to create furniture designs that could be produced by the pupils in the carpentry workshop. Early in 1885 a prototype was made by buying

an ordinary kitchen cupboard and painting it "in the style of Old Russian painting. Vasnetsov decorated the door on the main facade with stylized birds [on a ground] of stylized plants . . . so that a cupboard worth 1 ruble 30 kopeks became much more valuable."³⁷

By this time Mamontova and Polenova were evidently seriously discussing the future of the kustar carpentry workshop on the estate, and the experiment with the cupboard suggested a way to reorganize the workshop along more artistic and, most important, more profitable lines. By the end of May 1885 they had agreed that Polenova should become the workshop's artistic director and create a range of new furniture designs closely modeled on authentic examples of folk art. At the same time, the two women would set up a sister workshop for peasant girls that would produce modified examples of peasant embroidery and weaving. Polenova presented the idea of this "furniture and costume enterprise" to Savva Mamontov and received his blessing, as she reported to her sister-in-law, Natalia:

[He] encourages us to do both, and advises us to put them on a broader footing. I told him about my idea for producing this kind of furniture in the Abramtsevo workshop and then having artists supervise its decoration by some of the local painters at Troitse[-Sergieva Lavra], the ones who decorate pottery there – the more so because they say this production has totally stopped providing them with a living. Then we would put [the furniture] up for sale at a kustar exhibition. This pleased him very much.³⁸

The girls' workshop operated for little more than a year before Mamontova was compelled to close it down for want of trained personnel. During that time it was typical of a dozen or so other private estate workshops already scattered throughout Russia in the 1880s:

[Mamontova and Polenova] taught the girl pupils at the school to work the old Russian patterns, masses of which were collected in neighboring villages and in the adjoining province of Vladimir. In addition they distributed work to be done at home. [The girls] sewed cloths from homespun linen, and aprons from *pestriad* (striped linen) and *naboika*; they experimented with embroidering towels using old stitches and so on. Under Elizaveta Grigorievna's influence the local peasant women once again took up weaving linens and *pestriad*, plaiting sashes, and all manner of other peasant women's work that had been abandoned because of the factories.³⁹

The boys' workshop offered much broader scope for intervention. Although wood carving had long been an integral part of peasant life in Dmitrievskii uезд, where Abramtsevo was located, furniture making had never been a traditional kustar industry there. Ever since the

great Moscow fire of 1812 had created a "furniture famine" in the capital, the kustar furniture market had been concentrated in Zvenigorodskii and Moskovskii uyezds to the south. If successful, the Abramtsevo carpentry workshop would thus introduce a new industry to the region, created from scratch out of what remained of folk art and folk traditions in the Russian countryside.

Polenova embarked on the task of designing art furniture for the Abramtsevo pupils with a clear sense of purpose and what might be called a fully formed design philosophy. In a letter written at the end of 1885, she explained the considerations that guided her in selecting motifs for the workshop:

We have made it a condition to resort as little as possible to using publications and various kinds of printed material in general. . . . [O]ur aim is to seize hold of folk art that is still living and give it a chance to develop. The material that turns up in published sources is for the most part dead and forgotten. Consequently the thread has been broken and it's terribly difficult to mend it artificially. When a peasant is asked to copy from thirteenth- and fourteenth-century artifacts that are unknown to him and long forgotten, it may seem to him just as foreign as copying a Moroccan or ancient Greek artifact. This is why we are mostly looking for our inspiration and models by going around the huts and looking closely at the things that make up their environment, trying naturally to exclude the more recent foreign additions.⁴⁰

The "thirteenth- and fourteenth-century artifacts" she mentions here were in fact the medieval manuscript illuminations whose interlace patterns were a major source for the so-called Old Russian style that was very much in vogue in polite Russian society at this time; their source – the influential albums and facsimiles published by Russia's two leading schools of industrial art, the Stroganov School of Technical Drawing in Moscow and the School of the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts in St. Petersburg (Fig. 9). Both schools were committed to the creation of a viable Russian style for the decorative arts that would make Russian manufactured goods more competitive on the European market, and for this reason they were generously subsidized by the Ministry of Finance and the Council on Trade and Industry. As the director of the Stroganov School, Viktor Butovskii, pointed out in the preface to *The History of Russian Ornament* (1870), it was not enough to find

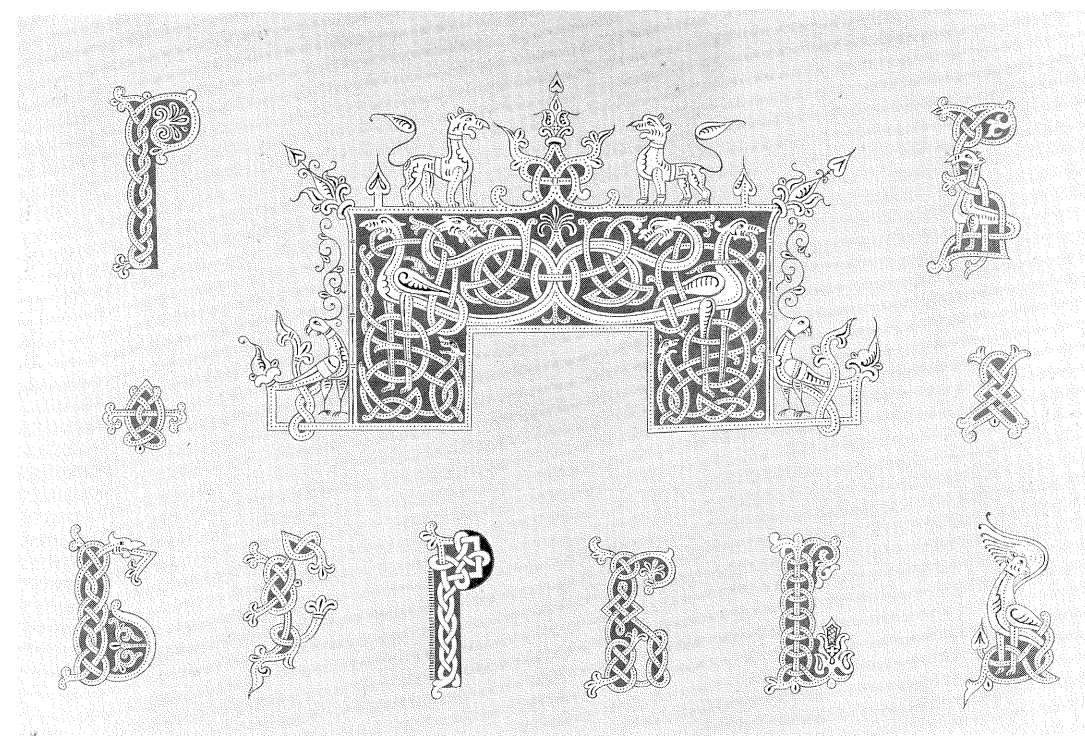
traces of ancient Russian art that bear witness to its independence, and to have rescued from neglect a body of materials showing a remarkable and contradictory ornamentation. These findings must be propagated, public

sympathy must be roused by these treasures of ancient Russian art which have been unknown for so long, and above all this art must be made accessible to industrialists and to artists.⁴¹

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In addition to the bookish interlace style, Russian artists and architects also drew for ideas on the courtly life of the seventeenth-century Moscow boyars and on peasant art in all its manifestations, particularly embroideries, lace, and wooden architecture (Fig. 10). For the most part, the Old Russian style of the 1880s, as interpreted by architects like Ivan Ropet and Viktor Gartman, was a compilation of motifs from a wide range of periods and media, linked by little more than their common Russian origins. But in enthusiastically embracing the national cultural heritage, early practitioners of the Russian style came up against the problem of sources. The collecting and study of Russian art was a comparatively recent phenomenon, especially in the case of peasant art, and despite the activities of the Imperial Archaeological Society, the Academy of Arts, the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts in St. Petersburg, and the Stroganov School in Moscow, the

Figure 9. Page from *Histoire de l'ornement russe*, compiled by V. I. Butovskii (Paris, 1870–3). (Courtesy of the Getty Center Resource Collections)

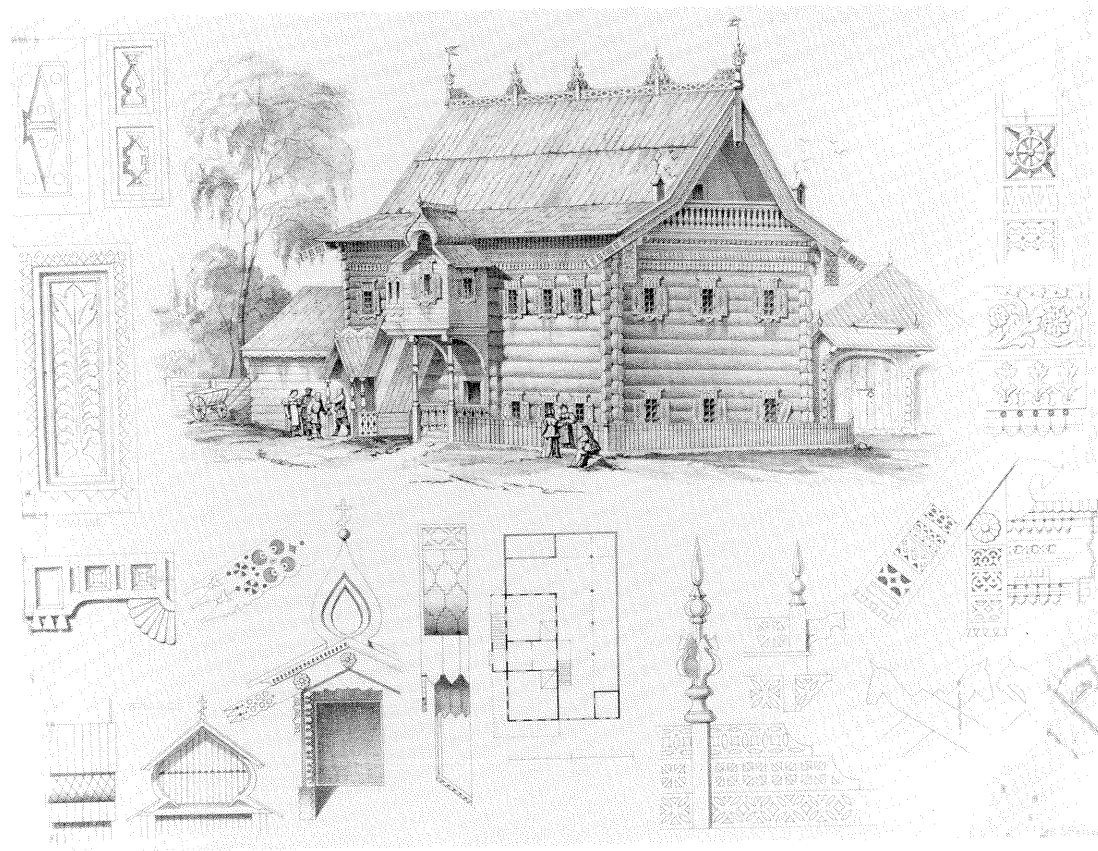


number of publications and collections available by the mid-1880s was still very small. In the words of the architect Nikolai Sultanov,

The need to work in the Russian style and the demand for it not only exist, but are growing all the time, and yet there is almost no material available. What alternative do our artists who have to compose Russian wooden decorations have? Naturally, only one – to make use of some kind of published materials, even if they don't have anything to do with wood carving but are taken from other branches of Russian ornamentation. And so in the "Russian" works of our artists we see transposed into wood, ornamental motifs embroidered on linen taken from [Stasov's] *Russian Folk Ornament* . . . or else motifs from manuscript illuminations, taken from [Butovskii's] *History of Russian Ornament*.⁴²

Figure 10. Drawing of a wooden izba from Kostroma with details of exterior decorations, by Vladimir Dal', early 1870s. (Reprinted from *Zodchii*, 2 [1872])

Polenova's decision to avoid the hackneyed motifs that had been circulating for over a decade and to draw instead on the new, unpublished material from the Abramtsevo collection and her own sketchbooks provided the Abramtsevo kustar workshop with the invaluable commercial advantage of exclusivity and novelty – "the fact that these



things can be bought only from us," as she put it. An even more radical break with the past at Abramtsevo was the substitution of country kustari for the urban craftsmen (*remeslenniki*) to whom designs in the Russian style were usually entrusted. In St. Petersburg, where both the production and the clientele for such goods were concentrated, the kind of furniture illustrated in the journals *Zodchii* (The Architect) and *Motivy russkoi arkhitektury* (Motifs of Russian Architecture) was carried out in the professional workshops of Büchtger, Shtange, and Shutov, while glass and porcelain in the same intricate interlace pattern were made at the Imperial Glass and Porcelain Factories.⁴³ For the average educated Russian, accustomed to associate the kustar with the least admirable aspects of the Russian peasantry, entrusting peasants with the production of artistic furniture designed by a professional artist was a very dubious proposition.

In her first five years as artistic director of the Abramtsevo kustar workshop (1885–90), Polenova assumed a role that was essentially editorial, her own creative personality firmly subordinated, she believed, by the strict guidelines she had set herself. Rarely inventing motifs of her own, she was content to select from the store of ornamental fragments that she and Mamontova had accumulated during their collecting expeditions, refining them where necessary through the filter of her own taste to make them palatable to a more affluent, urban market. Many of her decisions were of a purely practical nature, involving the transposition of ornamental motifs from their original, exclusively rural source to objects with a broader application – for example, adapting the carving on the handles of laundry beetles to decorate brackets for a wall shelf, transferring a rosette from a roughly carved sideboard to a compact bedside table, or embellishing a simple hanging cupboard with floral chip-carving (Fig. 11). Some items (saltboxes, tea caddies, little boxes) could be copied in their entirety, while others needed only slight modifications (a child's chair enlarged into a full-size armchair). Polenova was also receptive to the pupils' own skills and ideas, as when they "made themselves little cupboards to hold their tea things. . . . On a visit to the workshop Elena Dmitrievna sketched a corner with two of these cupboards in it. It was decided to take one of them as a model and repeat it."⁴⁴

Less frequently, Polenova allowed herself the challenge of imaginatively stepping inside the mental world of the anonymous peasant craftsman by trying to create as he might, with the ornamental fragments at her disposal. The outstanding example of this approach was the so-called column cupboard, which she designed in 1885 (Fig. 12). Using photographs, watercolor sketches from her album, and actual

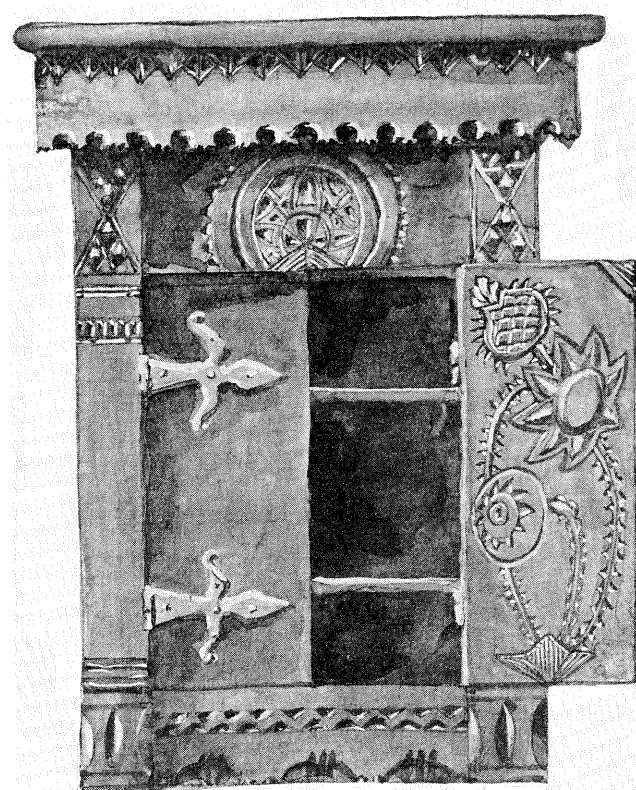


Figure 11. Design for a cupboard, by Elena Polenova, ca. 1885. (Reprinted from *Mir iskusstva*, 1 [1899]. Courtesy of the Getty Center Resource Collections)

pieces from the Abramtsevo museum, Polenova selected a number of motifs from a wide array of sources:

Its basic shape was inspired by a cupboard that V. D. Polenov had made, the details Elena Dmitrievna took from the museum and her sketchbooks. The lower part with the sliding door came from a shelf in the village of Komiagino, the handle from a painted beetle found in the village of Valishchevo in Podolskii uезд. The top band came from the front of a cart and the column was found in the village of Bogoslovo in Iaroslavl province. The vase with the rose painted on the first cupboard was from V. D. Polenov's sketchbook, drawn from the swings on Maidens' Field.⁴⁵

That such designs were a serious attempt on the part of an educated Russian painter to emulate the creative and emotional processes of some anonymous, illiterate Russian peasant is made clear in a letter that Polenova wrote to her sister-in-law Natalia, describing two new cupboard designs for the workshop: "The door of the column cupboard with stars, moon, wild strawberries, and flowers represents untamed nature. It's a meadow cupboard. My corner cupboard, though, is a two-story house – upstairs on the sill there's a flower in a pot,

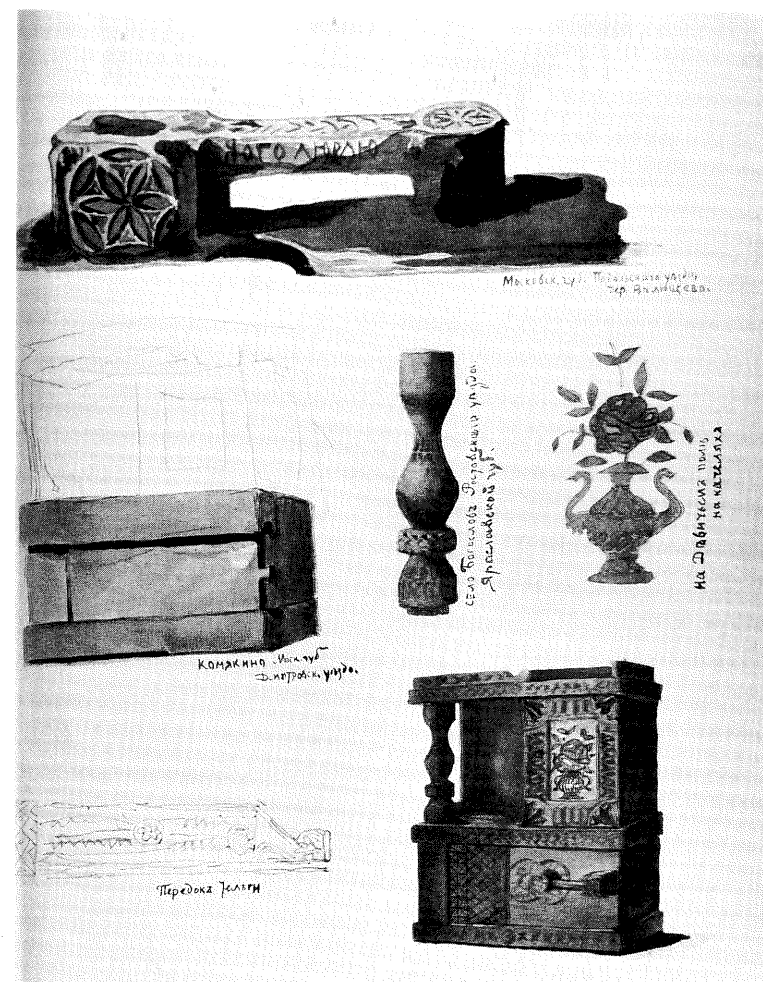


Figure 12. Page from Elena Polenova's sketchbook showing the evolution of the column cupboard, 1885. (Reprinted from N. V. Polenova, *Abramtsevo* [Moscow, 1922])

while through the lower window you can see the sunset."⁴⁶ The somewhat self-conscious naïveté of this statement, with its overtones of retreat to a child's imaginary world, suggests that Polenova was attempting a poetic reincarnation of folk art and folklore in the only way she could imagine, through her own childhood memories of nature. A direct link that would seem to confirm this idea is the project she was working on throughout her involvement with the workshop, to collect and illustrate Russian fairy tales. Her first, so-called Abramtsevo cycle was completed in 1889, although only one of the tales, *The War of the Mushrooms*, was published, and consisted not only of texts taken from the great folklorist Afanas'ev, but also of variants on traditional fairy tales that she had herself collected from peasants. As she later explained to Vladimir Stasov, her designs for the Abramtsevo workshop were inseparable in her own mind from her illustrations,

both being rooted in her own observations of and responses to actual peasant life, so that the following comment applied equally to both activities: "I want to express . . . the Russian people's poetic view of Russian nature, that is, to explain to myself and others how the Russian landscape influenced Russian folk poetry and was expressed in it. . . . I want to notice and express those imaginary artistic images that nourish and give life to the imagination of the Russian people."⁴⁷

For Polenova's generation, monuments and artifacts from the past were no longer of purely scientific or archaeological interest, as had been the case in the early years of scholarly research into Russian antiquities. Instead, they were increasingly valued for the direct emotional link they provided between the present and a vanished past. In the presence of such monuments many intellectuals of Polenova's day believed it was possible to recreate intuitively the spirit of life in the reign of, say, Ivan the Terrible (1533–84). This intensely personal and poetic experience of Russian history was due in no small part to two famous historians of the day, whose books and lectures had a profound influence on their contemporaries' attitude to their national heritage. Ivan Egorovich Zabelin (1820–1909), keeper at the History Museum in Moscow and a leading authority on the life of pre-Petrine Rus, was widely admired for his ability to recreate vividly the spirit of the past. In the eyes of his contemporaries he was far more than a historian, he was "a researcher-artist, capable of investing archival and archaeological 'stagnation' with a vital spirit and of forcing even the driest historical documents to speak in a living language. Beneath Zabelin's talented pen our past was resurrected and long-buried persons took on flesh and blood."⁴⁸ His writings were to be found in every educated Russian home, and in the construction of the Abramtsevo church were constantly consulted for information and inspiration. Equally celebrated was the historian Vasilii Kliuchevskii (1841–1911), whose lectures on Russian history at Moscow University were attended by a broad cross section of the population, including Elizaveta Mamontova and Elena Polenova. Polenova was especially struck by Kliuchevskii's uncanny ability to speak of life in medieval Russia as something personally experienced, "as if he were a traveler who had recently been in the thirteenth or fourteenth century and on his return, full of fresh impressions, told all about what he saw there, how people live, what their interests are, what they strive for, what kind of people they are."⁴⁹ This highly subjective attitude to the past undoubtedly colored the collecting of folk art at Abramtsevo. As Polenova's sister-in-law Natalia, an active participant in these expeditions, put it, each piece they found contained "so much personal creativity, such a strong sense

of the creator's spiritual experience, that [it] breathed of the past and brought it back to life."⁵⁰

When it came to working with living people, however, such states of intuitive empathy were more difficult to sustain, as was demonstrated by an unsuccessful attempt to include adult kustari in the new production. For several months in 1885 Mamontova and Polenova hired a kustar pottery painter called Semen from the neighboring village of Komiagino to decorate the furniture from Polenova's designs, a rather daring plan that at first seemed successful. "There's no need to stimulate his creativity, it turns out, it just needs to be held in check," Mamontova noted. "He's not at all inhibited by the pattern he's given and makes contributions of his own everywhere, in some cases quite successfully, in others most inappropriately."⁵¹ As demand for the furniture increased and the two women could no longer keep up with painting the decoration themselves, some of the more capable pupils were sent to Semen's workshop for training. The sight of Semen in his Russian blouse, surrounded by peasant boys learning to copy stylized flowers on paper, created a most poetic impression on Polenova during her tours of inspection, and in her first major oil painting, *The Icon Workshop* (1887), she transposed the kustar workshop of the present into an icon workshop of the past. This, at least, is how Natalia Polenova interpreted the painting:

Working herself with the kustari and having thoroughly investigated their private lives, she had a vivid image of the setting in which icons were once created. She remembered Semen from Komiagino with his pupils and imagined the patriarchal atmosphere and the coziness of a thirteenth-century workshop. In her thoughts she was transported to that long distant past and tried to depict it in her painting *The Icon Workshop*.⁵²

In reality, however, Semen could not be prevailed on to copy Polenova's drawings exactly, and despite her hopes that he would eventually "get accustomed to what we require and what we like," the clash of creative wills could not be resolved and she ultimately had to dismiss him. After this experience they gave up the idea of enlisting adult kustari, concentrating instead on training the more malleable and impressionable boys in the workshop. Henceforth, when a new design was ready to begin production, a pupil was shown how to decorate the prototype by Polenova herself, before it was sent to the workshop for regular production.

The search for a permanent and stable market for the new Abramtsevo furniture began almost as soon as the workshop was reorganized in

1885. The problem of markets (*shyt*) was one that nobody committed to the improvement of kustar industry could ignore, for without guaranteed sales all technical and artistic improvements were pointless. The very nature of kustar production – the fact that the kustar worked not for a known customer but for a distant clientele whose needs and tastes he did not always understand – meant that those who wished to improve it had to assume the duties of the middleman themselves. As kustar supporters never tired of pointing out,

Many crafts are in a particularly depressed state because they have an inadequate, capricious, and precarious market for their goods, or else there is quite a large market but the goods reach the consumer through the hands of a middleman who retains a considerable, sometimes excessive, part of the money earned. . . . To expand the market and to put the kustar in direct contact with the consumer – this is one of the most important goals whose attainment can not only speedily improve the position of the kustar, but also secure the success of all other measures.⁵³

The owners of private workshops needed to be particularly ingenious in this regard, finding clients among their personal acquaintances and risking their own capital so as to convince kustari that the improved goods they were encouraged to produce would find guaranteed sales.⁵⁴ For the first five years the Abramtsevo workshop was in production Elizaveta Mamontova assumed the role of benevolent middleman between kustar and client herself, supplying raw materials on credit and often paying the most needy kustari immediately on receipt of their goods.

The workshop's first customers were mostly family friends like the painters Il'ia Repin and Viktor Vasnetsov, the collector Pavel Tret'iakov, and the singer Fedor Shaliapin. But as the production expanded and graduates of the workshop went home to their villages to work independently, the need to find a reliable retail outlet in Moscow became pressing. In this early period of meager government funding and support for kustar industry, such outlets were few and far between. In May 1885, the very month the Abramtsevo workshop was reformed, a major new outlet for kustar goods opened in Moscow near the Nikitskii Gates, the Moscow provincial zemstvo's Kustar Museum, equipped with warehouses and a commercial outlet for sales direct to the public. When Mamontova and Polenova brought samples of the new Abramtsevo repertoire to the Kustar Museum, however, they were greeted with suspicion and their goods accepted for sale only grudgingly.⁵⁵ There were questions raised as to whether the pupils in the workshop even qualified as kustari at all, given the professional training they received. Moreover, items such as the column cupboard

accorded ill with public expectations about what authentic kustar goods should look like and showed the Kustar Museum's own "unimproved" stock (knitted scarves and stockings, locks, knives, and trays) in a most unflattering light. Equally unsatisfactory was a short-lived arrangement between Mamontova and her husband's sister-in-law, Maria Mamontova, who sold Abramtsevo furniture at a very high commission out of her Moscow toystore, Children's Education, on Leontievskii Lane.

Only in December 1886 did Mamontova finally move into her own premises on Povarskaia Street, which she shared with the toystore of a Madame Vereshchagina. Here the stock included "goods from the joinery workshop, peasant handicrafts, embroideries, linen, pestriad, naboika prints, belts, and birch-bark containers ordered from a sample that the . . . head of the workshop had happened to bring back from his native province of Vladimir."⁵⁶ Natalia Polenova reported that the Moscow public seemed eager to visit this "new kind of store, with its artistic kustar goods made exclusively by the Russian folk, long forgotten and supplanted by factory wares,"⁵⁷ and by the end of the second day sales had reached 360 rubles. At the same time the workshop exhibited at the charity bazaars that took place each December before Christmas and occasionally worked on individual commissions.⁵⁸ By the beginning of 1889 Elizaveta Mamontova was able to take over the entire shop on Povarskaia Street and hang outside a signboard that read "Sale of Carved Wooden Objects Worked by Pupils of the Joinery Workshop in the Village of Abramtsevo, Moscow Province, Dmitrievskii uезд."

After almost five years under Polenova's artistic leadership, with a stable Moscow outlet and a growing clientele among the well-to-do, the Abramtsevo kustar workshop was clearly a success, but an isolated one nonetheless. Whereas industrialists and the Ministry of Finance had long ago realized the commercial rewards that artistic refinement and a national ornament could bring to manufactured goods, those responsible for upgrading the kustar industries had still not learned this fundamental economic truth as late as 1889, when an exhibit of kustar products was sent to the Paris Exposition Universelle. As the official catalogue defensively conceded, "The collection, got together by subscription, is far from complete and gives only a vague understanding of an industry that occupies millions of hands."⁵⁹ The impression it made was uniformly depressing and only added fuel to the argument that kustar industry had no place in the life of a civilized, industrialized nation. One French journalist noted contemptuously the following kustar goods, displayed in cracked glass vitrines smeared

with fingerprints: "Eggs made of sugar, shoddy mirrors, little clocks, combs, primitive toothbrushes, dozens of buttons, some sort of Tartar beads, and scarecrow-dolls."⁶⁰ In short, apologists for Russia's kustar industries had yet to convince the educated public, at home or abroad, that such goods answered their needs or deserved their custom.

The following year, however, an extremely significant agreement was concluded between the Abramtsevo workshop and the Moscow Kustar Museum, now under the enthusiastic thumb of the philanthropist and merchant Sergei Timofeevich Morozov. Finding the increasing numbers of graduate kustari too great a responsibility and financial drain, Mamontova began to divest herself of some of her burden, evidently also pressured by the kustari who were very much in favor of greater independence.⁶¹ Henceforth, for as long as the pupils attended the workshop and for their first year of independent work at home, their goods would be sold at the Abramtsevo store on Povarskaia Street at a set price. Once they had left the workshop and returned to their villages as bona fide kustari, they would deal directly with the Kustar Museum. Although the actual number of Abramtsevo-trained kustari involved was very small,⁶² it can be claimed that it was through them that the principle of direct artistic involvement in the design of kustar goods spread out into the outlying villages and infiltrated the official policy of the Moscow Kustar Museum.⁶³ Unlike his predecessors on the museum board, Sergei Morozov clearly realized that an association with Abramtsevo could only be beneficial, enhancing the run-of-the-mill kustar exhibits sold at the museum with a much-needed veneer of artistic chic and refinement. Having seen the Abramtsevo experiment succeed, Morozov was convinced that "in addition to material aid, the kustar ought to have the opportunity to improve his goods both technically and artistically, that he must be given good models that retain a folk spirit."⁶⁴

Thus relieved of her most onerous administrative duties, in 1890 Mamontova moved the outlet to its final location on the Petrovskii Rows, renamed it the Magazin Russkikh Rabot (Store of Russian Works), and enlisted the young painter Mikhail Vrubel to design the interior and all its commercial fixtures. Recently arrived in Moscow from Kiev in a state of nervous exhaustion and acute financial need, Vrubel had been introduced to the Mamontovs by his former classmate at the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, Valentin Serov, and was now living in the family's mansion on Sadovo-Spasskaia Street. No doubt Elizaveta Mamontova's rather minor commission to decorate her new store was first and foremost a sorely needed source of income for Vrubel, entailing the design of such mundane commodities as a

counter for measuring fabrics. Given the novelty of the goods sold at Russian Works, however, the experience must have been a pleasurable one for Vrubel, especially since he himself was beginning to experiment with ornamental composition in the recently opened ceramics workshop at Abramtsevo. Although no record of the store's interior appears to have survived, it may well have looked much like Vrubel's watercolor sketch for a stage set, done some years later when he worked as a designer for Mamontov's Private Opera Company.⁶⁵ While it displays the ornamental extravagance that was to become so typical of both interior and stage design in Russia during the 1890s, it is also just what one would expect to see in a store where an array of colorful and highly patterned embroideries, pieces of furniture, and ornamental knickknacks are crowded together for sale: in fact, the more popular of Polenova's designs – a corner stool with horse-head back, a carved mirror and bench – are clearly visible, as is Vrubel's own countertop.⁶⁶ Nevertheless the very fact that a parallel is possible between a fantasy stage set and a place of business suggests that a theatrical or otherworldly experience was precisely what the customer was intended to enjoy while shopping in the Store of Russian Works.

Between 1885 and 1893 Elena Polenova designed over one hundred items for the carpentry workshop at Abramtsevo. "Classic" Abramtsevo furniture, such as can still be found in private collections in Russia and Europe, was characterized by the low-relief, geometric chip-carving widespread among the peasants of central and northern Russia in the nineteenth century, often enlivened by stylized plant and animal motifs. Around 1890, however, Polenova's designs for the workshop underwent a noticeable stylistic evolution that was accompanied by changes in her attitude toward her work there. Abandoning the neat geometry of the standard Abramtsevo carving style and borrowing little direct material from folk art, she now began to develop a new vocabulary of ornament derived from the flora, fauna, and animal life of the Russian countryside, severely stylized and arranged in abstract patterns. Characteristic of this new ornamental style was a wooden door, bowed out toward the base like the walls of the Abramtsevo church, and carved on both sides with motifs that included owls, a cat, and rows of stylized floral motifs (Fig. 13). Polenova considered it "the most important and complex of my works in this style," and at least ten copies of it were made at the Abramtsevo workshop. This "Cat and Owl" door particularly caught the attention of Vladimir Stasov, a fervent champion of nationalism in music and the arts and a particular supporter of women artists.⁶⁷ Stasov was delighted with the

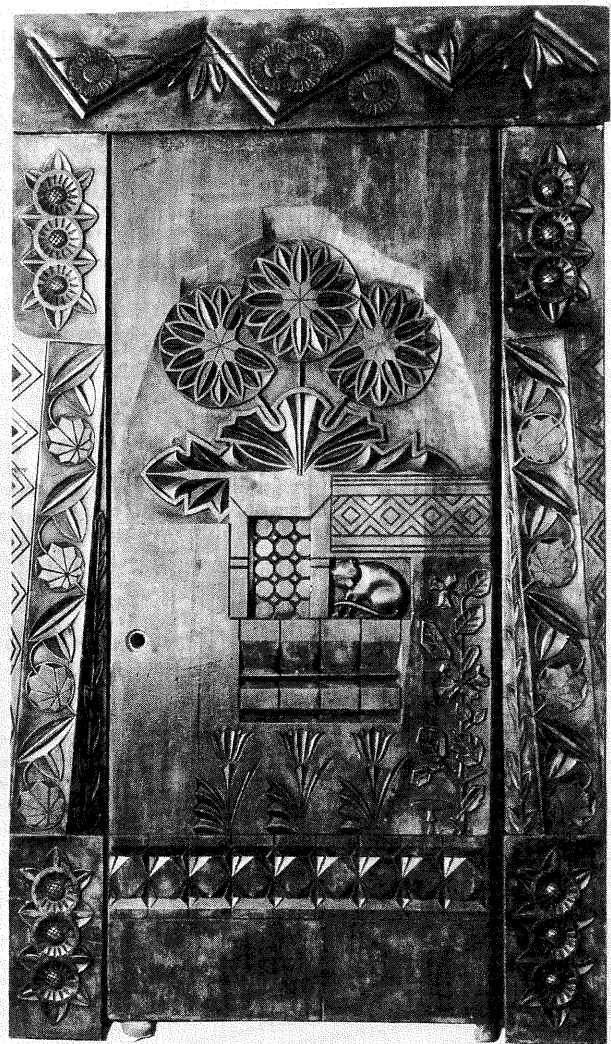


Figure 13. "Cat and Owl"
carved door, designed by
Elena Polenova and made at
the Abramtsevo workshop,
early 1890s. (Courtesy of
Izobrazitel'noe Iskustvo,
Moscow)

door and wrote to Polenova with characteristic hyperbole: "Publish it in any 'ouvrage' you please and every intelligent person will swear that it's the work of some amazingly talented, anonymous master of our ancient Rus. This is something unimaginable for me, the stuff of legends. The ancient Russian fairy tales and poems have been resurrected!"⁶⁸ But although Stasov could not have suspected it at the time, this and a handful of other furniture designs done in the early 1890s pointed to the future rather than the past. Less and less interested in the ostensible ethnographic purity of the sources at her disposal, Polenova embarked on a search for a grammar of ornament that was above all emotionally convincing, based on her own internal relation-

ships to the Russian countryside, her own perceptions of what it meant to be Russian.

It is not easy to account for this abrupt change in Polenova. A letter to a friend written in March 1889 suggests that she was even then interested in exploring more personal and intimate forms of expression. Of two ideas for future paintings she outlined, the first was to be a piece of historical genre painting, depicting "a bright sunny summer day, a courtyard in the estate of a prosperous grandee of the sixteenth or seventeenth century, a trained bear dancing in the middle with his trainer, a goat, and a drummer, to the left of a well a young lad is sitting while a pair of bear cubs are rolling on the grass beside him."⁶⁹ The second painting, however, of three children in a modern-day nursery, was to be a recollection of her own rather grim childhood. But while her sympathies were very much with this second theme, she also felt that "one shouldn't show such intimate things to the public." In fact, when *The Nursery* was exhibited in 1892 at the annual Wanderers exhibition in St. Petersburg, critics reacted with hostility to the disquieting lack of sentimentality in the scene, finding "neither the childish naïveté, the carefree joy, nor the enchanting smile that composes all the poetic charm of a child's little face."⁷⁰

Certainly, the fact that the year 1890 marked the decisive break between her "old" and "new" styles was to some extent symptomatic of similar metamorphoses occurring in Russian culture as a whole. Within the Mamontov circle itself the shift could be felt in the unspoken tensions between Viktor Vasnetsov, then midway through painting the interior of the new Cathedral of St. Vladimir in Kiev, and Mikhail Vrubel, who had lost the commission to the older artist and had to be content with designing some of the ornamental bands on the aisles. Polenova was herself very much aware that "the epoch when it was easy and simple for people to band together in small groups and work together, advancing in a friendly crowd toward their goal," was at an end, and that a new era of artistic independence, individuality, and isolation was at hand.⁷¹ While her psychological need to put herself at the service of others continued to be a strong motivating force in all her activities throughout the 1890s, it manifested itself in encouraging other artists to develop their potential, rather than in the volunteer social work among the masses that had sustained her during the previous decade.⁷²

Other issues arose to complicate the apparently simple relationship that had bound Polenova to the workshop and to Elizaveta Mamontova. Although as late as 1890 Polenova was still enthusiastically devising new prototypes for the workshop, that March she complained to

Mamontova that although overall the boys were working fairly well, "they've really lost their independence and resourcefulness, and this is holding up production."⁷³ The restrictions on her own creativity that her self-imposed guidelines for designing kustar furniture necessitated were becoming irksome, and she felt an increasing need to assert her own personality, to get credit for her own work and not just for skillfully editing the work of others. "It's very hard to distinguish where what belongs to the people ends and what is my own begins," she later explained to Stasov. "And it's something I would like to make clear, not out of some kind of false modesty, but simply because it's much nicer to be praised for what I myself have created, rather than for something I've been able to make use of."⁷⁴ Polenova's interest in the workshop visibly cooled over the next few years, and her withdrawal came as a shock to Elizaveta Mamontova, who after the sudden death of her son Andrei in 1891 found herself more than ever in need of her friendship. According to art historian Dora Kogan, "At the time nobody could explain her sudden and apparently inexplicable cooling off toward Elizaveta Grigorievna, and she clearly felt out of her element at Abramtsevo."⁷⁵ Although for the next three years Polenova produced a handful of new designs – all of them using her new ornamental motifs – her energies were increasingly diverted in other directions, as she tried her hand at genre scenes in oil (*Guests, The Nursery*) and a second series of fairy-tale illustrations.

Whatever the reasons for her withdrawal, by 1893 Polenova was no longer visiting or designing for the Abramtsevo workshop, and from this time onward until her death in 1898 practically broke off all contact with it and with Elizaveta Mamontova. So ended the "Abramtsevo period" in Polenova's artistic career, although it was not to be the end of her crucial contribution to the transformation of the kustar industries, as we will see in the next chapter. Still less was it the end of her influence on the kustari of the Abramtsevo region, for Polenova left behind her not only a valuable repertoire of salable designs for furniture, but also the first successful working model for kustar reform specifically through artistic intervention and collaboration. With government funding still very tight by the mid-1890s, the efforts of private citizens like Mamontova played a far larger part in kustar reform than the government cared to admit. Perhaps because of its antecedents under serfdom, the estate workshop appeared to be the natural organism in which to "concentrate forces on assisting a few branches of kustarnichestvo, and within given branches to help perhaps only a specific sector of the population."⁷⁶ Given the monumental task of

reforming the habits and overcoming the prejudices of millions of demoralized kustari, all on a shoestring budget, it was precisely small, carefully controlled training workshops such as that at Abramtsevo which promised immediate and gratifying results.⁷⁷

In Polenova's absence the workshop continued to flourish under the direction of Egor Zelenkov, a former pupil.⁷⁸ The most popular of her designs – the column cupboard, the hanging shelves, mirrors, tables, and various carved caskets – were regularly reproduced both in the Abramtsevo workshop itself and in dozens of peasant huts and villages throughout the district. The workshop's visibility and fame increased dramatically throughout the 1890s, and it won gold medals at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, the Nizhnii Novgorod All-Russian Arts and Industries Exhibition in 1896, the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900, and the First All-Russian Kustar Exhibition in 1902. Financially too, the workshop and its graduates thrived, while kustari in neighboring villages adopted the Polenova repertoire with alacrity and sold their work through the Moscow Kustar Museum.

Success was not without its side effects, however. For Mamontova, whose motives had been purely philanthropic from the start, "the more business grew and the number of present and past pupils increased, the more difficult it became to preserve a moral link with them, to direct them."⁷⁹ Isolated incidences of moral turpitude among peasants whom she had helped – two former pupils caught drunk at a fair, a woman stealing wood from the Abramtsevo forest – seemed not only acts of personal betrayal, but signs that the workshop and school had not after all had the ennobling effect she had hoped for. For others more concerned about the workshop's artistic integrity, expansion brought with it a decline in quality and an element of mechanical mass production.⁸⁰ Without constant artistic supervision and a steady flow of new designs, the kustari who made Abramtsevo furniture had nothing to gain economically by sticking to the letter of the law as regards Polenova's original designs. Now independent of the workshop and working in their own homes, they copied from copies of items like the column cupboard, blurring little by little the precision of Polenova's original vision (Fig. 14). What Natalia Polenova dismissed as "meaningless combinations of various types [of Polenova furniture] devoid of talent and with a veneer of debased marketplace taste" now appeared on the market, produced by kustari who had set up on their own or joined the Soiuz (Union) Association, a joint-stock company founded in Moscow in 1900 to trade in kustar goods.⁸¹

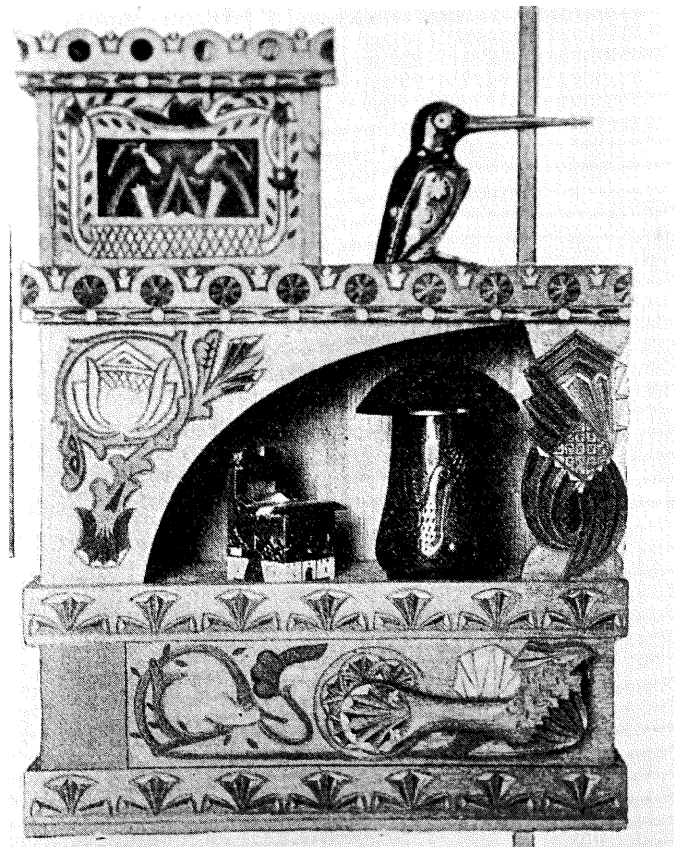


Figure 14. Cupboard made
at the Sergiev Posad art
joinery workshop, ca. 1907.
(Reprinted from *Niva*, 39
[1907])

Despite the very tangible economic benefits that the Abramtsevo workshop had thus brought to the peasant population of Dmitrievskii uезд, for those who had undertaken this labor of love the larger goals of improving the peasant population's quality of life either ethically or aesthetically (rekindling traditions of popular art) proved more elusive. Without Polenova's continued presence, the mass production of her designs "deteriorated," at least in relation to the standard she had set, in a way that was endemic to the kustar industries. For, as one observer explained,

If they do not receive new models, even the best kustar workers either repeat the same pieces year after year . . . or they copy those goods made by other workers that happen to come their way. Therefore they produce only the goods that have already been made in their own region for years. Not only are they all the same, they . . . also lose their original pleasing design and bright coloring, and in general become crude and tasteless.⁸²

By the end of the century a noticeable shift could be detected in the expectations that the public had of "improved" kustar art, thanks

to the success of the Abramtsevo experiment. Polenova furniture had become an economically viable industry in Moscow province and a desirable commodity among the bohemian and well-to-do circles of Russian society. Yet the more it achieved its primary goal of financial solvency for the kustari themselves, the more it was reproached (at least in artistic circles) for standing in one spot and becoming like the factories it had set out to challenge: mechanical, mass-produced, generic. As the kustar art industries moved ever closer to the industrial arts at the hands of government ministries, zemstva, and artists alike, the economic program with which the kustar revival had begun its activities and which at Abramtsevo had been the *raison d'être* for Polenova's activity there fell into the background while issues of stylistic innovation came to the fore. Still, throughout the next two decades Abramtsevo was to be the model and the standard against which other kustar workshops with artistic pretensions measured themselves and which they attempted to rival.